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What Is and What Can Be: How a Liminal Position Can Change Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract

In this article we analyze what happens when undergraduate students are positioned as pedagogical consultants in a faculty development program. Drawing on their spoken and written perspectives, and using the classical anthropological concept of liminality, we illustrate how these student consultants revise their relationships with their teachers and their responsibilities within their learning. These revisions have the potential to transform deep-seated societal understandings of education based on traditional hierarchies and teacher/student distinctions.

Key words: liminality, position, student consultant, learning, change

Despite broadened rhetoric in educational discourse and more democratic practice in some educational contexts, well-established divisions and hierarchies still structure relationships between students and faculty in most institutions of higher education. Accordingly, the responsibilities of students and faculty are informed by particular assumptions regarding knowledge transmission and acquisition. 'Disciple' and 'follower' are among the synonyms for 'student' (Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition), and in most institutions of higher learning students are expected to follow faculty members through a course of study

toward greater capacity. When students and faculty adhere to these traditional expectations, the responsibilities of learning and teaching are clearly delineated.

We reframe this set of traditions as a problem of practice and analyze how the creation of a new position for students within a faculty development program — the position of 'student consultant' — catalyzes a revision of students' relationships to their teachers and their responsibilities within their learning. We use the term 'liminal' to describe the position of student consultant because this classical anthropological concept foregrounds 'in-betweenness,' a quality of experience with unique potential to challenge deep-seated assumptions about how a community or society works. Occupying neither the traditional role of student in a classroom to learn content nor the traditional role of teacher aiming to impart content, and falling outside of other familiar categories in college contexts (e.g., teaching assistant), student consultants assume a position that is "ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (Turner 1974:232). Thus positioned, student consultants develop perspectives and capacities that, they suggest, transform their educational experiences and that could transform deep-seated societal understandings of education based on traditional hierarchies and teacher/student distinctions.

We begin our discussion by revisiting definitions of 'liminality' and locating our use of the concept within the research literature. We then offer brief descriptions of the context of, participants in, and methods used in our study. After these contextualizing efforts, we analyze how student consultants reposition themselves as 'in between' in relation to classrooms, faculty members, and other students. We then focus on the changes described by those who take up the position of student consultant, substantiated by reflections offered by faculty members with whom those students worked, to illustrate the revisions of those students' relationships to their

teachers and their responsibilities within their learning. We conclude with a call to rethink the way learning and teaching are conducted in higher education: a call to revise a relationship that has been hierarchical in ways that move toward the democratic, and a call to recognize that we as teachers and students can learn from each other in deeper and more lasting ways if we strive for more shared and reciprocal teaching and learning.

Defining and Situating 'Liminality'

Drawing on the root of 'liminal' — limen or threshold — 'liminality' typically describes a condition between two periods of active social participation, a transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person's life (OED online). People in this state elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space (OED online). Betwixt and between all fixed points of classification, people in a liminal state enter what noted anthropologist Victor Turner described as "a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (1995 [1969]:97). Those in liminal states are often ritually, symbolically, or metaphorically separated from the collective so that they do not threaten the social order. There is power that comes from this separation — the potential to challenge and disrupt established norms — but there is danger as well; those in a liminal state are never secure: their position is never fixed but instead constantly shifting and vulnerable.

While most discussions of liminality focus on transitions between one and another period or stage of a person's life, we are interested in exploring liminality as a threshold between and among clearly established roles at which one can linger, from which one can depart and to which one can return. Specifically, we seek to understand what happens when undergraduate students take up a liminal position between student and teacher not with the goal of transitioning from the

former to the latter but rather with the goal of accessing and acting upon the insights that such an indeterminate state affords and the potential that crossing and re-crossing the limen has to transform ongoing teacher/student relationships.

Because of both its threat and its potential power, the notion of liminality has been used to analyze transitional or indeterminate states in a variety of contexts. Researchers of contexts as disparate as graduate programs of sociology (Deegan & Hill 1991), the Fourth World Congress of the International Drama/Theatre in Education Association (O'Farrell, Garcia & McCammon 2002), and contemporary organizations (Garsten 1999) have taken up Turner's (1974) phrase "betwixt and between" to illuminate the in-between period, location, and experience of transition within contemporary cultural and community contexts. Some researchers focus on the spaces and processes intended either to facilitate transitions into educational institutions and normative states within those (Bettis 1996; Irving & Young 2004; Manning 2000; Mannis 1997; Rushton 2003) or to promote resistance to those normative states (Anfara 1995; Huber et al. 2003). Others focus on the transitional state of the passenger — the ambiguous positions within an organization of temporary employees (Garsten 1999) or consultants (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003) and the networks and temporary teams that cross organizational divides (Tempest & Starkey 2004).

More recently, scholars have focused on how the notion of liminality can inform our understanding within educational contexts in particular. It offers insight into how students in a cross-disciplinary course on engineering and social justice approached the idea of using social justice as a 'lens' for looking at engineering (Kabo & Ballie 2009). It illuminates students' experience of the transition into the university environments of academic and student life (Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens 2009), several female professors' efforts to reconstruct their professional identities in academe (Bosetti, Kawalilak, & Patterson 2008), and transitions where

the subject in question transgresses established rules and regulations (Kofed 2008). Liminality provides a conceptual framework for analyzing the final stage of teacher preparation as a contemporary rite of passage (Cook-Sather 2006a) and the new self-understandings and meanings that can emerge when students enter a liminal state in the context of social work education (Hurlock, Barlow, Phelan, Myrick, Russell, and Rogers 2008).

The present work is more closely aligned with the studies in the latter group, those that focus specifically on educational contexts, but as mentioned above, our interest is less in the transition from one stage or state to another and more in what happens when one enters and leaves as well as sustains the suspended state of liminality and with how this experience can change learning and teaching at the college level. This discussion focuses on the experiences of students who take up the role of consultant through Bryn Mawr College's faculty development program; other discussions focus on the changes faculty members experience through their partnerships with student consultants (Cook-Sather 2010b, 2009a, 2008).

Context

Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT), part of The Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr College, positions undergraduate students as consultants to college faculty members regarding issues of teaching and learning in classrooms at Bryn Mawr College and at nearby Haverford College. SaLT is part of a larger initiative that aims to create new structures within which all members of the campus community — faculty, staff, and students — interact as teachers, learners, and colleagues (http://www.brynmawr.edu/tli). The initiative seeks to foster a culture that operates on principles of equality and functions as an integrated, interactive, and evolving whole (Lesnick and Cook-Sather 2010). The initiative invites all community members to enter liminal states — to cross the thresholds among

established positions and within the larger hierarchical structures according to which the institution operates — and strives to support various alternative teaching and learning opportunities, positioning students in particular as those with valuable insights about education and capacities to teach as well as learn.

Within this context, SaLT works to facilitate generative dialogue about teaching and learning between faculty members and students and, through that dialogue, to explore, affirm, and improve teaching and learning in classrooms on the campuses of Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College. It is premised on the basic conviction of student voice work — that because students have unique perspectives on learning and teaching they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education (Cook-Sather 2006c) — and, like this study of participants' experiences within it, the program casts students as informants on their own educational experiences (Cook-Sather 2007).

Students who serve as consultants are not enrolled in the courses of the faculty members for whom they consult. They range from sophomores to seniors, major in different fields, claim different identities, and bring varying degrees of formal preparation in educational studies (from those with no coursework in education to those pursuing state certification to teach at the secondary level). Any student enrolled at Bryn Mawr College or Haverford College can apply to serve in the paid position of student consultant. The application includes a statement of why they would be good at being consultants and two letters of recommendation (one from a faculty or staff member and one from a student).

Student consultants spend approximately seven hours per week on the following activities: conducting weekly observations of faculty members' courses and, if faculty request it, interviews with or surveys of students in the class; preparing their observation notes to inform

weekly meetings with their faculty partners; attending weekly reflective meetings with Alison Cook-Sather, in her role as coordinator of SaLT, and other student consultants; and making five visits to the weekly pedagogy seminar in which the faculty members participate as part of the SaLT program. Any faculty member who teaches at Bryn Mawr College or Haverford College may apply to participate in SaLT. Participating faculty span departments, have varying years of teaching experience, and claim a range of cultural and ethnic identities. (See Cook-Sather 2010b for another discussion of this work.)

Participants and Methods

Participants in the study upon which this discussion is based include 55 undergraduates enrolled at either Bryn Mawr College or Haverford College and 104 faculty members who teach at one of these two colleges. All participants were part of the SaLT program between Spring 2007 and Spring 2010. To gather the meaning perspectives of students who have served as student consultants, we engaged in participant observation and in constant comparison/grounded theory (Creswell 2006; Strauss 1987) of weekly one-hour meetings among student consultants and Alison, which were audiorecorded and transcribed, and of mid- and end-of-semester surveys.

Both of us were participant observers, albeit from different positions. Alison, a faculty member at Bryn Mawr College, is the facilitator of the SaLT program and has convened and conducted the weekly meetings of all participants since the program's inception in 2007. Zanny Alter, an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College at the time upon which this study focuses, was a student consultant during the 2007 and 2008 academic years, and thus a partner with faculty members and a participant in the weekly meetings of student consultants, and a research assistant during the 2009 academic year and summer.

Our choice to co-author this article represents an effort to challenge traditional hierarchies

and teacher/student distinctions in keeping with the argument we present here. Zanny was never a student in Alison's classes, but our institutional positions certainly were not free from traditional power dynamics. We regularly checked with one another in an attempt to name and address any discomfort that emerged out of the hierarchies and distinctions imposed by our institutional positions. In working together to produce this discussion, Alison drew on her previous use of liminality in her analyses of teacher preparation, and Zanny drew on her previous use of the concept in her senior thesis. We both analyzed data, composed portions of drafts, and revised this article.

Student Consultants (Re)positioning Themselves: The Importance of Perspective

When students enter classrooms as consultants, they are not students enrolled in the courses in which they take up that position, but they are nevertheless students within the context of a classroom. Because they do not fit into the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in the cultural space of the classroom, how they position themselves — literally (where they sit and why), but also metaphorically (in their relationships to themselves, to their faculty partners, and to other students) — shapes how they experience themselves and how they are experienced by others in the classroom and informs the perspectives they develop.

How Repositioning Produces Intersecting Perspectives

There is no set of requirements within the SaLT program that dictates how student consultants position themselves in the classrooms they enter, but simply being in the position of student in the classroom but not student enrolled in the course constitutes and prompts repositioning. From her location, a student consultant is able to observe what, as one faculty member put it, "I cannot from my vantage point." This professor emphasized that he meant this "not only figuratively but also literally, as she has a line of sight into the space of the classroom

which I do not have from where I stand." This "line of sight" illuminates the classroom in new ways; as this faculty member explained: "Her observations have helped to open up for me the space in the classroom in ways which I have not seen before."

From their literally different position, student consultants have a different angle of vision that, when it intersects with the faculty member's angle of vision, creates an arena not only of vision but also of interpretation. Between them, the student consultant and faculty member create a new space where their 'visions' intersect, and in that space they not only see differently but also analyze and can either deepen and affirm what they see or imagine changing what happens in the classroom.

Within this newly created space at the intersection of the faculty member's and the student consultant's angle of vision on the classroom, faculty members and student consultants do not focus on their traditional responsibilities of teaching and learning content, respectively. Rather, they contemplate *how* teaching and learning are unfolding in the classroom — contemplation that is not possible in any sustained way when one is engaged in the act of learning or teaching because it requires a certain distance from the moment, not just in terms of time but also in terms of position (or space).

As Rodgers (2010) reminds us, "The opportunity to see depends on the ability and the freedom to observe" (49). Describing the vantage point and insight her new position afforded her, a student consultant explained:

> My involvement [as a student consultant] has allowed me to view the experience of learning when I am not engaged in that role [of learner] myself. If I don't understand something that the professor is explaining, I try to figure out *why* I don't understand it, as opposed to struggling with how to write the course content

> in my notebook. This feeling provides a clear space for me to think about *how* a professor teaches and I learn, as opposed to *what* is being taught and learned.

This shift in focus inspired and supported by the newly created space for perception, dialogue, and analysis stands in sharp contrast to the transmission paradigm that informs traditional teacher/student relationships and invites more various angles of vision to inform both teaching and learning in the classroom. Imagining a shift toward more democratic classrooms and more shared and reciprocal teaching and learning, we suggest that an integral part of learning and teaching could be a consideration of how different people in the room are making sense and how those different senses can inform one another. Faculty might consider how to create positions in the classroom from which to discern those processes and regular opportunities to do so.

Understanding the importance of having a different angle of vision and from that angle discerning a different classroom, some student consultants deliberately position themselves at a new angle within the classroom to gain such perspective. Such a choice might be particularly appropriate if the student consultant is focusing on how differently positioned students within a classroom experience that course, but many pedagogical issues can be illuminated by a deliberate change of angle of vision. Zanny said the following in one reflective meeting when she was a student consultant working with a faculty member on creating a more culturally responsive classroom:

> Last week I read through the report on [creating more culturally responsive classrooms at Bryn Mawr College] and was struck by this passage, "Make conscious with whom you align yourself and why and try to complicate, question, and perhaps expand that positioning." In response to that question for myself I sat in a different place in the classroom [in which I was a student consultant]. In the

> past I sat in the 'outside' circle because that's where the people in the class I knew sat (who are people of color) and I realized that I was both physically and mentally aligning myself with them. Which I don't think was 'wrong,' but I wanted to sit somewhere in the classroom to try and problematize that for myself and I think it was successful. Sitting at the table today I felt part of the classroom community, which I hadn't felt before. And it confirmed for me the importance of literally bringing all the students to the table.

Not only does such repositioning allow student consultants to access what differently positioned students in the class might experience, it also allows them to analyze that experience critically and formulate insights to share with their faculty partners — a responsibility rarely if ever assigned to students enrolled in a course. Student consultants learn that new angles of vision can lead to new understandings, and they can then be deliberate about continuing to view classrooms through a lens informed by multiple angles of vision. Their development of this capacity within the partnerships they have with faculty members through SaLT can, as we discuss later in this article, inform how they experience and participate in other classrooms and relationships and how they invite other faculty members and students to experience and participate in those.

How Repositioning Illuminates Inaccurate and Conflicting Perspectives

While the new angles of vision student consultants are able to offer and inspire can change what is perceived and what happens in the classroom in positive ways, questions and concerns about what sense to make of those angles of vision arise as well. One important lesson is that an individual student perspective (that of the student consultant) should not be mistaken as

infallible or omniscient. Observations are always necessarily partial, incomplete, and sometimes inaccurate, as this student consultant's comment illustrates:

> I guess it's important to take in all forms of observation, because I misread initial student behavior. So it's good to have multiple perspectives, instead of just mine. I am not a student in that class, so I don't understand what's going on. It's important to have their feedback as well.

What student consultants discern from their position as student in the classroom but not student enrolled in the course throws into relief both what a faculty member might see and misinterpret and also how students themselves may misperceive other students' perspectives. It also throws into relief for the participating faculty member the importance of soliciting the perspectives of students enrolled in his or her course and not relying solely on his or her own perspective on what is happening there.

In addition to affording student consultants the opportunity to bring misperceptions to light and into dialogue, the in-between position these students occupy allows for bringing to light and into different interpretations what is happening in a classroom. One student consultant illuminated how her positioning and her faculty partner's positioning — both in the sense of identity and in the sense of perspective — necessarily yielded different interpretations of the same classroom and the interactions that unfold within it: "Our different perspectives mean that we are seeing different things, and we have different biases, so we sometimes have some conflict when we meet about what's going on in the classroom." The opportunity to explore these conflicts does not generally exist between faculty members and the students enrolled in their courses, or if it does, it is always necessarily limited and informed by the hierarchical relationship of teacher and student. Through her repositioning within the classroom and among

its participants, the student consultant eludes the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space and affords her an unusual opportunity to inform how a faculty member interprets and, in turn, supports what happens in the classroom.

The position of student consultant requires students to draw on what they know as students and to convey it to others (faculty members) who cannot know what they know. Afforded a voice, set of opportunities, and sense of empowerment not usually experienced by college undergraduates, student consultants learn to occupy a "space apart," as one student consultant put it, and to be the only one in that position looking from that particular vantage point. From that position, each student consultant needs to negotiate between imposing her vantage point on her faculty partner and affirming the perspective the professor already has. For these reasons, the student consultant is constantly in a state of suspension, balancing the known and unknown, moving forward on ground she and her partner are establishing that also shifts with each new advancement.

The student consultants' repositioning highlights the way in which positionality can be understood as shifting and identity as "a starting point — not an ending point…a vehicle for multiplying and making more complex" people's identities and relationships (Ellsworth 1992:113). Indeed, positioning theory highlights the importance of understanding the shifting multiple relations in communities of practice (Linehan and McCarthy 2000:441; van Langenhove and Harré 1999), and some feminist poststructuralists recommend that we embrace the "slipperiness of identity" as a "powerful means through which we can 'denaturalize' ourselves and embrace change" (Orner 1992:75; see also Cook-Sather 2001). Developing a certain degree of comfort with such shifting, denaturalizing, and changing from within the liminal position of student consultant, students are prepared to sustain and act on in other

classroom contexts and relationships the perspectives they get from within the position of student consultant.

Student Consultants Changing Relationships: The Importance of Dialogue

The literally different position the student consultants take up and the intersecting and conflicting perspectives that emerge as a result locate them differently in relation to faculty members with whom they work in the "space apart" of their partnership. Turner (1995[1969]) suggested that novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise in the realms of possibility constituted by liminal spaces because "the cognitive schemata that give sense and order to everyday life no longer apply but are, as it were, suspended" (Turner 1981:161). One faculty participant's reflections point to this potential as it is catalyzed by the repositioning of the student as a consultant:

> What makes this relationship so amazing is that you [the student consultant] are not responsible for the content and you are free of the grading. That's why we can be more honest. And because we have confidentiality I can tell you what I am struggling with in ways that I would NEVER talk to a student. Because we are outside of the normal relationship.

Just as the different perspectives student consultants and faculty members develop through dialogue with one another based on their different angles of vision can inform subsequent actions and interactions they have in classrooms, so too can having the opportunity, within a partnership that defies the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in the cultural space of the classroom, prompt both students and faculty to reconsider relationships between students and faculty more generally.

How Dialogue Facilitates a Change of Relationship

The position the student consultant occupies bridges "what is" and "what can or will be" (Turner 1981:159; Cook-Sather 2006a) in relationships between faculty and students. The ambiguity and indeterminacy of this position create both excitement and uncertainty in the students who become consultants, as well as in the faculty with whom they partner. Student consultants are placed in a powerful position to illuminate what is happening in the classroom, to make recommendations, and to spark change, but they also find themselves in an uncertain place vis-à-vis their fellow students and their former and future teachers.

In Zanny's experience, recognizing and discussing the ways in which this new kind of position impacts faculty and students in different ways is important to developing a partnership grounded in trust and honesty. For faculty members to tell student consultants that having someone in their classrooms makes them nervous and makes them feel like they are being monitored is important, because it helps the student consultants recognize the potentially vulnerable position of faculty members. Similarly, a student consultant may want to explain to her faculty partner that she feels unsure of her place in the classroom (is she an observer, a participant, or something else altogether?), and her doing so can help strengthen a partnership by making explicit the unique nature of the positions that both participants are taking up.

The kinds of conversations Zanny describes above may not be easy, especially at first, but they are essential to keeping open the space of perception and reflection, of perspective and dialogue, created by the advent of the student consultant position. They allow students to linger at the limen and to offer their insights from that vantage point, and the forging of such relationships constitutes a step on the path to a more enduring revision of student and faculty responsibilities in learning and teaching.

How Dialogue Complicates a Change of Relationship

Because it is located among established roles and responsibilities in a classroom, the student consultants' position immediately raises questions of alignment or allegiance that do not necessarily emerge without the catalyst of someone occupying an in-between position. Is the student consultant aligned with the faculty member for whom she is consulting or with the students in the class? The consistency with which this question is foregrounded for student consultants speaks to the salience of the 'in-betweenness' they experience. Student consultants wrestle with these questions for a variety of reasons, the most consistent of which are that they have the most explicit contact with the faculty member and building that relationship is their stated purpose and activity. But even in the context of developing a collegial relationship with a faculty member, student consultants' 'expertise' is predicated on their student identity. Additionally, they know that their work with faculty members is to help them explore, affirm, and improve their teaching and experience but that ultimately is also about exploring, affirming, and improving the experience of students. So there is a way in which student consultants can never rest for long in either just the student or just the consultant perspective, and that perpetual in-betweenness is itself productive of insight as well as generative of further questions.

The factors that contribute to making these partnerships, and student consultants' individual experiences in them, so meaningful are the same ones that make them complicated. The design of the student consultant position and the SaLT program itself facilitates a liminality that may shift in some ways (e.g. a student who repositions herself) but also sustains itself in some way throughout the course of her participation and, potentially, beyond it. Here too are constituents of a new way of understanding classroom participation and relationships: As students move in and out of the consulting role in relation to faculty, a position they occupy only while observing or engaging in dialogue with faculty, the perspectives they develop begin to

inform their perceptions of other classrooms and their relationships with other faculty members and students. For some student consultants the transitions — the crossings over the limen — are jarring and disorienting: student consultants find themselves with questions such as, "Am I supposed to be telling this teacher how to teach his class?" Or "How do I talk to a professor in an honest way about a space (her classroom) where the separation between student and teacher is very present?" For others, the maintenance of multiple perspectives, the management of various alliances, and the integration into other relationships of the capacities developed while in the student consultant position are smoother.

While in theory, student consultants can align themselves with both students and faculty members, only some consultants find this to be possible in practice. One consultant said that she "was able to wear both hats," assuming the student perspective or consultant perspective depending on the situation. When gathering feedback from students in the course, she took on the student perspective, which enabled her to relate to the students as equals and identify with what they had to say. When meeting with the faculty member, she took on the consultant perspective and felt like a "quasi-colleague" discussing with the professor ways in which she could respond to students' concerns. However, she found it difficult to move between these two perspectives during these meetings with her faculty partner. She wrote in a memo:

> In our meetings, [the faculty member] was really good about asking me to position myself as a student matriculated in her class so that I can offer informed perspective. However, I found this request oddly difficult. Although, I am a student and have been for the last 7 1/2 semesters, sitting in [faculty member's] office in the role of observer, I found it difficult to be the student. Because I am aware of the objectives of this initiative and I know that [faculty member] has

> good intentions and is making the effort to best adjust her teaching and learning styles in the class, therefore I find myself quick to say that her suggestions are good while not really thinking about the ways in which the students will respond to the changes.

Although it was easy for her to take on different perspectives when she interacted with students and faculty member respectively, it was challenging for this student consultant to imagine herself as a student in the course while engaging in collegial dialogue with a faculty member. Contributing to this challenge is the development of empathy she feels for the faculty member with whom she works. With that sense of empathy comes a drive to support the faculty member's struggles insofar as student consultants see and even identify with them, so that the very fact of developing empathy sets up a desire to accept and support.

Why Dialogue Needs To Be Ongoing

Learning to balance these conflicts and treat them as generative places to build from is an important part of student consultants' learning as they negotiate various perspectives and identities. In contrast to Turner's liminality that emphasized people entering a liminal space to emerge prepared to develop new forms of identity and empathy, within the student consultant position identity and empathy are developed by the student consultant repeatedly repositioning herself — a repositioning she applies beyond the particular context of her partnership with a single faculty member. Over the course of a semester, a student consultant moves daily from the partnership within the SaLT program to other relationships with faculty and students, and moving in and out of the SaLT partnership informs how the other relationships evolve.

As a student consultant, Zanny found negotiating between various perspectives and differently located individuals central to the in-between nature of this position. From this in-

between vantage point student consultants learn the value of having multiple viewpoints and they get first-hand experience recognizing, prioritizing, and synthesizing these perspectives in the context of their position as a student consultant. Student consultants experience a novel relationship with faculty members by virtue of the fact that both are stepping outside the structures and dynamics that typically govern faculty/student interactions. They experience a revised relationship with other students primarily within meetings among other student consultants and Alison, and then subsequently, as we discuss in a later section, with other students when they create additional liminal spaces to be entered and re-entered.

The intersection of isolated suspension and shared experience helps participants remember that all perspectives are partial and shifting and that the experiences and expectations of those in a classroom, both teachers and students, can be not only enriched but also significantly changed through the dialogue that unfolds in the in-between spaces created when student consultants (and faculty) extend the ways of perceiving and interacting developed within their partnerships to relationships outside those.

Changes Student Consultants Describe in Experience and Expectation

The changes student consultants report experiencing illustrate what can happen if we let the in-between position of student consultant catalyze a shift toward more reciprocal teaching and learning not only within the partnerships supported by SaLT but also beyond those. We highlight three changes that student consultants describe in their experiences and that illustrate how we might rethink responsibilities of teaching and learning in higher education. These include students becoming better students, taking more responsibility for their education, and extending the capacities they develop from their liminal position within the SaLT program. What

is striking about these changes is that, from an in-between position, one can gain strength in the more traditional role of student *and* gain strength to be less bound by it.

Student Consultants Becoming Better Students

In contrast to liminality that only facilitates transition from a former to a new state, the liminality of the student consultant position also facilitates a move back to a former state, but it is a move that improves students' experience when they 'return' to the 'normal' state of student — a return that occurs for students daily as well as over time. Each semester, student consultants offer statements such as the following about this 'return': "I have become a better student" and "Participating in this program makes me a more aware and more engaged student." This becoming a better student does not simply mean following faculty as a disciple might. Rather, it means building on the new perspective the student consultant has as a result of working with a faculty member in a space apart and bringing the insights derived from that work to bear in other contexts. A student consultant explained:

> When I was writing the last paper I had, I found myself looking at the prompt and thinking more. The professor wasn't necessarily explicit about making connections, but I found myself being able to look at what the assignment was and being more able to decipher what the professor was emphasizing and what they were looking for. I think I ended up writing a better paper as a result. And it was sort of interesting to realize that, to be like, "I don't think I would have thought of this last semester; I would have just answered the question." Whereas this was more like, "What is the intent behind the questions?' and "Why are these questions set up as they are?" And, "How can I write a paper that is going

> to engage in a way that the professor is looking for us to engage with the material?"

This student consultant's analysis illustrates one faculty member's claim that "the kind of reflective understanding that the student consultant gets [through her work with a faculty member]…isn't inert...; it makes [her] a much better learner."

In analyzing how they have become better students, student consultants describe heightened awareness and capacity gained from their new angle of vision and their unique relationships with faculty members; they argue that they develop a deeper understanding of learning, through both private reflection and dialogue with the professor (and students whom they interview); they suggest that they learn in richer ways because of the multiple angles from which they view teaching and learning in classrooms; and they explain that they draw on their new understandings to engage more thoughtfully and constructively in their work. These are all ways in which students gain strength in meeting the more traditional responsibilities of students as a result of moving out of the 'normal' role of student, into the liminal position of student consultant, then back into the role of student.

When student consultants become better students in this way, faculty can become willing to shift their sense of teaching, too. One faculty member explained a change prompted by working with a student consultant and experiencing the shared exploration of teaching and learning their partnership invited: "I work with students in a more productive way, with a two-way dialogue which helps us explore different avenues in a train of thought." This faculty member contrasted this revised approach with its more transmission-oriented predecessor: "[I used to focus on] just getting the students to know particular things." This faculty member's reflection suggests a move from a more traditional, hierarchical delivery of content, a way of

thinking about teaching and learning within which the student follows the faculty member, to a more democratic and dynamic approach, captured by another faculty member's comment: "I'm working with students more fully or intensively from the perspective that we are all learners and all teachers."

'Returning' from their betwixt and between position into the more standard role of student, student consultants carry with them deeper understanding informed by multiple angles of vision and greater shared engagement and reciprocity in learning and teaching. Likewise, faculty members who develop insights within their partnerships with student consultants like those highlighted above apply those insights in their interactions with other students.

Students Taking More Responsibility for Their Education

The second change student consultants identify is the result of the increased capacities described above and the work required within their partnerships with faculty members not only to discern and value multiple perspectives but also actively to promote educational experiences within classrooms. From the position of student not enrolled but student nonetheless, and in ongoing dialogue with faculty about how learning is or could be happening, student consultants learn to take more responsibility for their education (Cook-Sather 2010a). One student consultant described this change:

> In past discussions I've always been talking about what the profs do to us and it's been a one-way street. And now I am able to look at it as a relationship in the classroom; if we're complaining about something that is going on, it's also the students' role to step up and say something about that.

Another student consultant asserted:

> Participation in [this program] has really made me feel more responsible for my own education. I no longer think that professors are responsible for having all the answers and making a class perfect and wonderful to suit my own needs. It is up to the entire community to make learning spaces function, so that means students have just as much responsibility as professors.

The sense of capacity students describe here is an active not simply a responsive one. They are partners and also agents, taking the initiative to shape and redefine, not only take up, what faculty members and courses offer. This capacity might be understood as civic, as students develop a more "generous self" (Dewey in Rodgers 2010:50) that both evolves as an individual and contributes to the collective society. This development is consistent with Dewey's notion of democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey 1916:93) within which the well-being of each individual is the concern of the rest of the community.

A challenge, though, in Zanny's experience, is that it can be difficult to have a realm (SaLT) where you feel incredibly empowered and your voice is valued, and others where it is not. It can create frustrations when you feel as though in certain arenas your voice is valued and invited, and in others you may just have to sit back and grit your teeth some because your feedback is not invited or may be clearly unwelcome. This frustration points to the maturation effect of liminality and its limits. The increased sense of responsibility and agency student consultants experience must be acted on in thoughtful ways in order for it to be challenging but not too destabilizing, for either the students or the faculty. Student consultants must navigate between a space in which "the cognitive schemata that give sense and order to everyday life …[are]…suspended" (Turner 1981:161) and spaces in which they must weigh the risks and

benefits of asserting their hopes and needs, of assuming the capacity they know they have to be active participants in shaping their education but that others may not recognize as appropriate.

The student consultants who participate in the SaLT program are not the only ones who strive to apply outside of the program the new understanding of responsibility they develop within it. Many faculty members who have the opportunity to work with student consultants rethink their own as well as student responsibilities, thereby extending to other students the benefits conferred upon student consultants. One faculty member explained: "I work with students more as colleagues, more as people engaged in similar struggles to learn and grow." This use of the term "colleague" signals a significant shift in understanding of education based on traditional hierarchies and teacher/student distinctions. This faculty member captured precisely the shift toward shared and reciprocal teaching and learning for which we argue here: "I have become even more convinced that students are experts in learning and essential partners in the task of creating and developing new courses and refining existing ones." Seeing themselves as partners with students does not mean faculty cede all authority. As another faculty member explained: "It doesn't mean that you are giving over control of the course. But there are elements of the classroom that we are co-responsible for, that we are traveling through together." (See Cook-Sather 2009a, 2010a, and 2010b for expanded discussions of this point.)

Although it will never be the case that hierarchies and power differentials between faculty and students in college classrooms are entirely eliminated, it is possible to create a more democratic relationship and a greater sense of shared responsibility. The opportunity to enter and then leave, and then re-enter yet again, spaces outside the network of classifications that normally locate positions in cultural space within which responsibilities for teaching and learning can be shared makes such changes, on a larger scale, more likely.

Students Creating Additional Liminal Spaces

The third kind of change student consultants describe emerges as a result of developing the capacity to, in one student consultant's words, "sit with the discomfort" of being betwixt and between all fixed points of classification. Some student consultants, after occupying the position of student consultant, feel a sense of "responsibility to create change for others," as one student consultant put it, through inviting them into spaces between what is and what can be and challenging the hierarchy and the traditional responsibilities of students and teachers.

Describing how, after being a student consultant for three semesters, she felt able to approach a faculty member who had not participated in the SaLT program about something concerning what had happened in a class, one student consultant mused: "Faculty don't necessarily need the formal liminal space [of the SaLT program]. The space can just be a question, that opening." From this student consultant's perspective, just asking a question about how teaching and learning are happening in a classroom creates the space within which to reposition themselves and to explore that question together, temporarily outside of standard modes of interaction within established orders.

About creating similar kinds of "openings" into which students might position themselves, this student consultant explained:

> Instead of simply agreeing or disagreeing, a constructive conversation can come out of a comment about a class. We can ask questions of our classmates — Why do you think that? What would make it better? — instead of leaving their ideas to literally fester. We can share the possibility that another way of thinking exists.

In both these examples, the student consultant draws on the capacity she developed through repeatedly entering and leaving the in-between state of student consultant and extends to other

relationships, with both faculty and students, the invitation to work together toward greater understanding and deeper learning.

Having worked as a student consultant for several semesters, Zanny both experienced and analyzed this third kind of change. During her last semester at Bryn Mawr College, Zanny took a class with a professor she knew well but had not taken a class with since her freshman year. This professor had been involved with SaLT since its inception and their existing relationship helped to establish a shared framework from within which they could talk about dynamics occurring in the professor's course. Their conversations about the class began when the professor asked for Zanny's feedback about how a specific class had gone and how to approach the class given that the students were in very different places in terms of their thinking about the course material. As a senior in the class, Zanny was one of the students who was deep in the work of the material and was looking for a way to engage with the topic in a deeper and unexpected way. This element of the class that developed organically allowed her to co-construct another layer of curriculum for the course that was illuminating for both her and for the professor of the course. It allowed her to create for herself — and the faculty member — a space apart within the space of the classroom they shared as teacher and student and to extend the kind of relationship she experienced when participating as a student consultant in SaLT.

Reflecting on her first post-college professional experience, Zanny has found that one of the most salient aspects of her current job is the fact that her position feels marked by her 'insider-status' in multiple contexts/communities, each of which also places her outside of other contexts and communities. Serving as partnership coordinator between Bryn Mawr College and an urban public high school, she works at the college she attended as an undergraduate, and she works across groups at the college with whom she has different types of existing relationships.

She also works at a high school where she had been involved before working there officially, and thus she occupies the liminal position of someone who works directly with the students within the school walls but is not employed by the school or district or directly beholden to its rules.

At times, her position feels overwhelming and uncomfortable — she often feels that she must translate between groups or mediate instances of miscommunication. At the same time, this is a familiar experience, since working as a student consultant she also at times felt torn about which entity she was most aligned with — faculty or students. Only a few months into her new job she had the opportunity to step back from her work and reflect with peers, similar to a student consultant meeting. In her reflection she was able to step out of the negative feelings of being overwhelmed that can come with existing in an in-between space and began to see how her ability to act as a bridge between multiple communities was in fact a strength. She was able to recognize that her ability to function, and in fact flourish, in this kind of in-between position was made possible in large part because of her work as a student consultant. She also recognized that this kind of in-between position from which she needs to be able to translate between groups is not unique to her job, or to her experience; most jobs have at least an element of these requirements.

Toward More Democratic Classrooms in Higher Education

We have attempted through our discussion to illuminate how the liminal position of student consultant embodies possibilities for re-imagining the responsibilities of learning and teaching at the college level. The lessons we can take from what we learn from student consultants and faculty members who have worked together though the SaLT program include the importance of recognizing the power and potential of bringing different perspectives into more democratic dialogue; of making spaces for such dialogue within which faculty and students

contemplate together how learning is or could be happening in college classrooms; and of building on these insights and experiences to inform teaching and learning beyond these spaces apart.

The SaLT program provides an institutional space within which students and faculty members can engage in these processes outside of their regular relationships and practices. Not only can such spaces be created in real time and space between faculty and students, they can be created more metaphorically: within the heads of students and faculty. Student consultants describe the ways they talk themselves through new challenges, such as the transition from undergraduate student to working adult, and how their having occupied the position of student consultant helps them not only endure but actually embrace and sustain the uncertainty such changes entail. Faculty members report similar experiences. One faculty member said: "The student consultant voice remains in my head during lectures [and] discussions and I am trying to rethink my presentations or view them from a student perspective while talking." The amplification of one's own internal voice (in the case of student consultants) and the internalization of external perspectives (in the case of faculty who have worked with student consultants) as well as the sensitivity gained to one another's points of view creates an internal space within which ongoing dialogue that no longer unfolds literally in real time can continue to unfold. Dialogue in this less literal sense creates perspective, in a more metaphorical sense, inside one's head that allows one to remain intentional because suspended, momentarily, outside the flow of engagement — a suspension that then re-informs action. The concept of liminality might be extended here to apply to meta-cognition: taking the time to step out of the doing into a space of thinking about the doing might be understood as the creation of an internal liminal space.

The experiences and revisions we discuss here constitute a unique form of empowerment for students within college contexts in ways that inform student/faculty relationships more generally. Positioning students as partners or colleagues of faculty, and thus deliberately challenging the class or status of students (and faculty) can create a kind of "radical collegiality" (Fielding 1999; see also Cook-Sather 2002, 2009b) that helps us move toward more democratic classrooms. By making students active participants in their learning, including their voices as part of an ongoing discussion of teaching and learning, and ensuring that listening and speaking are the twin responsibilities of all parties (Lodge 2005), it is possible to change the traditionally hierarchical relationships among faculty and students. Affording students opportunities to share "decision-making, implementation of action, and reflection on action" (Holdsworth 2000:358), and affording faculty opportunities to learn "with and from" students in "more holistic ways through processes of co-constructed, collaborative work" (Fielding 2006:311) allows students to engage actively as dialogue partners, as co-conceptualizers and co-constructors of educational experiences and revision (Cook-Sather 2006b, 2006c, 2010a; 2010b; Rudduck 2007). Living such possibilities in liminal spaces allows faculty and students to imagine enacting them in actual classrooms; when we experience something out of time and place and then bring back what we have experienced, we are better able to change the reality to which we return.

This movement toward more democratic relations in the classroom and this carrying forward of more reciprocal learning and teaching connect to the final lesson thrown into relief by this study: the importance of unfinishedness, which, as Freire (1998) argued, is what makes us educable. Instead of focusing on a transition through time from one state into another, our call for revision of student and teacher responsibilities invites a focus on an ongoing and unending process of dialogue and development in multiple indeterminate states, suspended between and

among established institutional roles and mindsets, always unfinished, always requiring revisiting, revisioning, and re-enacting. Learning to dwell in uncertainty and embrace the ongoing dialogue, negotiation, and learning from the multiple perspectives brought into dialogue through SaLT opens up possibilities for change that dwelling in the assumed certainty of established structures and states cannot. The student consultant position helps students make the most of what is — the experiences they can have in their traditional roles as students — and what can be — what they perceive and enact as more active and responsible agents and as in-between dwellers not only receptive to but also able to engage realms of the possible. We have attempted to illustrate how this in-between dwelling has the potential to change how we conceptualize and enact the responsibilities of learning and teaching, and we hope others will extend these opportunities to challenge deep-seated understandings of how higher education works and could work.

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